The Fourth Church Pulpit

LIFE BEFORE DEATH

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I find it deeply disturbing and unsettling whenever I think about how we have become accustomed to death: to the death of the soul, to death on the streets, to death through violence, to death-before-life ... Where Jesus is there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life, and eternal life. There is life-before-death ... if we want to live today, we must consciously will life. We must learn to love life with such passion that we no longer become accustomed to the powers of destruction. We must overcome our own apathy and be seized by the passion for life.

Jurgen Moltmann
The Passion for Life

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Scripture
Matthew 5:1-11
Deuteronomy 30:15-20

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."
Deuteronomy 30:19 (NRSV)

When she received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, American author Toni Morrison began her acceptance remarks with a story. I have read it to myself many times. It has come to mean a great deal to me personally. And I should like to read it to you this morning as an introductory commentary on the text we just heard.

It is a story about an old woman.

> "Blind but wise, the daughter of slaves, black, American, who lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question.
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> "The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away. ...
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> "One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is.
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> "Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says,
>
> 'Old Woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead?' She does not answer and the question is repeated. 'Is the bird I am holding living or dead?'
>
> "Still she does not answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive.
>
> "The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.
>
> "Finally she speaks, and her voice is soft but stern. 'I don't know,' she says. 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.'"

Toni Morrison continued:

> "Her answer can be taken to mean: if it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility."

It is in your hands ... it is your decision ... it is your responsibility. It ... life ... the life of the community ... the life of the nation ... the life of the church ... the life of the children ... your one and only life ... is in your hands.

It is exactly what their leader tells a band of ex-slaves who have been wandering around the wilderness and are, at the moment, peering across a river at the land they have been seeking and toward which they have been heading for forty years. It is, of course, the future they are looking at and it is an ominous and frightening moment. And so their leader, Moses, who now knows that he is not going with them over the river and into the land, that he will die there on the far side of the river, delivers a long and somewhat tedious speech. It always reminded me of what parents do as they are about to send a child off to college or away to summer camp. At the

very last minute, as they are stepping out the door, you try to condense and deliver all vital survival and life-giving information you have accumulated over the years one last time: "be careful, go to bed on time, eat your lettuce, brush your teeth, keep your room neat, wear your hat, drive slowly, ..."

So Moses goes on and on. Do this, don't do that, remember the days in Egypt, remember the covenant, remember who you are. And at the very end he says the most remarkable thing:

> "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days." [Deuteronomy 30:19]

What's going on here is that a frightened group of people are about to walk into a new future and their greatest danger is that they will forget who they are and make some bad choices. Who they are is God's covenant people. The essence of who they are is that they are dependent on God and on their neighbors, on one another. What is different about them is that they live in this covenant relationship with their creator and with one another.

What Moses knows and wants desperately for them to remember is that this covenant and the community it creates is the source of life to them. They can choose to opt out, to forget the covenant, to live like other people live, for themselves. Moses knows that apart from the covenant, life deteriorates to a mean individualism — every man for himself, every woman for herself. You can choose that, he tells them: you can choose death. Or you can choose life. It's your decision. What a remarkable thing to say to anxious people peering into an uncertain future. How this enterprise turns out is up to you. You can count on God to be with you but you have decisions to make, responsibility to exercise.

I found it quite impossible to think about that incident and those words and not ponder our community, our nation, our choices.

German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, traveled throughout our country lecturing and later reflected that Americans seem consciously to be choosing death. He referred to the incredible level of violence with which we live in this country and the fact that we have become accustomed to it. "How can you stand it?" he asked a friend in New York City. "Oh, you get used to it after awhile," was the answer.

It does seem that we are choosing this for ourselves and our children. Everyone in the culture except the gun lobby knows that one of the component parts of our national disgrace is the numbers of handguns, semi-automatic and automatic weapons and their continuing availability. We accumulate evidence: our best and most responsible and knowledgeable professionals — the police, the psychologists, the doctors — all agree there are too many guns, deadly weapons designed to kill as many people as quickly as possible in the hands of all sorts of Americans, not just hunters and people who want to protect themselves, but all sorts, even children. The Justice Department reports that 27 percent of felons buy their guns over-the-counter. There are 212 million guns in private circulation: almost one per citizen and the number is increasing by six million per year.

The American Medical Association calls gun violence the number one public health risk. You read the mind-numbing statistics. Urban hospital emergency rooms are flooded with gun shot victims and a grizzly nuance is emerging: with more and more semi-automatics on the street, the wounds are now multiple and more deadly. For what it's worth, each incident costs all of us $28,000 in hospital bills.

Many of the victims are children. A teenager in New Haven, Connecticut was looking for a rival gang member: stuck his 9mm semi-automatic pistol through the window of the house where he thought his target was hiding, pulled the trigger and killed a seven-month-old baby girl and paralyzed her grandmother. It's not happening in some far away place. Several of us went to the Center for Whole Life at Cabrini-Green for the Christmas party. We were sitting at tables, singing carols. I was having a conversation with a little girl about eight or nine-years-old. We talked about school and church and the cookies we were munching. Her arm was in a sling. "How'd you break your arm?" I asked, assuming she did it like most eight-year-olds break arms, fell off a bike or swing. "It ain't broke," she said, "it's shot." "Shot" I said, "like a gun? Where?" She nodded "out there, on the playground."

Who's making the decision? Not the American people. By substantial percentages the American people show that they want reasonable, responsible gun control.

We're also choosing violence as a life style, as a way of being in the world. We are subjecting ourselves and, more importantly, our children to a massive indoctrination in death and violence. It's called television. It's what the children of poverty watch four, five, six and seven hours per day. And when they do, they reflect the disruptive, violent behavior they see. Doesn't seem surprising does it? Dorothy and Jerome Singer direct the Family Television Research and Consultation Center and have now documented the fact that a four-year-old who watches a few hours of "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" and "GI Joe" becomes aggressive, disruptive and violent. The *Chicago Tribune* reported this week that 85 percent of the programming on HBO and Showtime is violent. Broadcast television does better at 44 percent. That's half the programming: explosions, fire bombs, murder, rape ... hour after hour, day after day. The best, of course, the least violent is Public Television which, increasingly in these peculiar times, must fight for its life.

Who is making the decision? When asked, American people by a margin of three or four to one say that they want less violence on TV, less murder as entertainment, less mayhem and death on the 10 o'clock news for that matter. But we're not in charge here. The market is. The toy companies are. The corporations who sell cars and beer and lawnmowers are, and the media conglomerates who increasingly dictate what goes on television and who produce violence because it is the most profitable product to sell on the global market, where the real profits are.

"Choose this day," Moses said. And it seems to me that one of the roles people of faith — when they are together in churches and synagogues and mosques — ought to be playing is to tell the rest of the world that we really do have choices: that we need not be helpless victims of the market: that our children deserve better than their indoctrination in violence: and the tragedy that if you are an African American teenager at Cabrini-Green, it is easier to get a gun than a job.

We are flirting, these days, with the notion that we do not have public responsibility for one another: that the way to make the system work is to force each individual to stand or fall on his/her own. Our faith tradition calls it the way of death.

But it is ultimately more than public. It is also deeply and profoundly personal and spiritual.

The choice between life and death is something we make as individuals.

Medicine knows it: that at least part of the process of healing is connected to the will: that people can and do choose life or death sometimes.

Psychology knows it: Rollo May taught that to live fully requires an "assertion of the self" — "a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them:" [*The Courage to Create*, p. 4, 5]

Poetry knows it: all the way back to Hamlet's "To be or not to be, that is the question." Contemporary poet Edwina Gattely:

> "You are called to become
> a perfect creation.
> No one is called to become
> Who you are called to be ...
> No one's shadow
> Should cloud your becoming,
> No one's light
> Should dispel your spark
> For the Lord delights in you, ..."
> [*Psalms of a Laywoman*]

And faith knows it. In a book of essays he called *The Passion for Life*, Jurgen Moltmann argued that there is a lot about modern life that works against the will to live, the passion for life that is within us. Apathy is the temptation, he argued, the cold, indifferent withdrawal from life; the giving over responsibility for our lives to fate, luck, the stars.

> "If we want to live today," he wrote, "we must consciously will life. We must learn to love life with such a passion that we no longer become accustomed to the powers of destruction."

The one we know as Lord and whose name we claim calls us to a new and passionate love of life. Sometimes we get it all wrong. Sometimes the Christian religion has seemed to say that if you avoid entanglements with this world you'll get to the next: that if you live a cloistered life and avoid all the wrong, you will receive life after death. But what Jesus taught and lived and died for was life before death, life lived with intentionality, commitment and passion. Life gloriously inclusive of all those who were consigned to death by their culture: outcasts, lepers, sinners. What Jesus taught and lived was life lived fully for God, as God's child, as God's subject, beholden to no one but God, afraid therefore of no one and nothing because of God's love. What Jesus taught and lived and died for was passionate life.

> "Where Jesus is, there is life," Moltmann wrote: "abundant life, vigorous life, loved life, eternal life." Life lived fully, purposefully, to the very end.

It is our choice — it is in our hands.

The choice will never be as clear for us as we think it must have been that day when the children of Israel stood peering over the river at their future.

For us, the decision to live — to be, to love life with passion — will come within another decision: a decision to resign our position and try a new one; the decision to apply to graduate school; to leave home; to leave a relationship, to commit to a relationship; the decision to write a poem or sing a song, to say I love you, I want you; the decision to sign up for a course, write a letter to your representative, call a legislator, turn off the television, tutor a child, write a check; the decision to join a church ... the decision to follow Jesus.

And in that decision, to be his man, his woman, to live for him, is to become wholly, and perfectly and completely myself, yourself. It is the mystery of faith that in saying "yes" to Jesus Christ we are saying yes to life, yes to our own life.

> "I have set before you life and death. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you."

Amen.